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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Utah Education Network, a closed circuit television delivery system used by the University of Utah in providing preservice education in rural regions. The audience of the system was graduate special education students. Interactive telecourses, video recordings, and instructors were involved. Two groups were formed from 11 individuals who had experienced different types of televised learning. Data were gathered through focus-group interviews and a video and audiotape record was made of each interview. Participants indicated that instructors who were well prepared and organized through the use of syllabi and study guides contributed to effective television instruction. Presentation skills were identified as important variables for effective learning. Student learning groups formed during telecourses were conducive to learning by providing support for the participants. It was important to the participants that they receive timely feedback about their progress through the instructor or the on-site facilitator. Skilled facilitators should know the course content well and communicate frequently with on-campus instructors. The critical variables that contribute to successful learning through television need to be recognized by people involved in the development and production of instructional programs. A table providing the demographic information of participants is included. (LP)

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Presenter: ~~Egan M. Winston~~
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Effective Television Teaching:

Perceptions of Those Who Count Most...Distance Learners

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Effective Television Teaching:
Perceptions of Those Who Count Most-Distance Learners

Introduction

More and more institutions of higher education are making use of telecommunication's technologies in delivering instruction to on-campus as well as off-campus learners (Cunningham, 1988; Egan, McCleary, Sebastian, & Lacy, 1989; Johnson, 1990a & 1990b; McCleary & Egan, 1989; Miller, 1988; Office of Technology Assessment, 1989). Off-campus or distance learners often receive their instruction through some form of television delivery system (satellite, cable, ITFS, or microwave systems). Since 1985, the Department of Special Education at the University of Utah has utilized the Utah Education Network, a sophisticated, closed circuit, television system to deliver preservice education to prospective special educators in many rural regions of Utah.

The Utah Education Network permits instructors to interact directly with distance learners. Instructors can be seen and heard by distance learners, and students in each of the rural sites can be seen and heard by their instructors. The network is totally interactive. However, there are regions of the state that are not yet served by the system. In these regions, the department makes use of a delivery system know as "Professor Plus." This system uses video recordings of interactive telecourses or typical on-campus courses coupled with rural facilitators/instructors. Professors come to students via video tape recordings. The plus part of this system is a trained master's level rural facilitator/instructor. The facilitator is responsible for conducting course learning activities, leading discussions, clarifying course assignments, providing timely

feedback, and taking care of other course related functions. The department has made greater use of this delivery system over time because of the lower costs associated with this approach. Also, the "Professor Plus" system provides a broader array of options that are more responsive to the needs of distance learners. For example, there is greater flexibility in scheduling video courses at the rural sites. Learners on or off-campus who miss a class may view the video portion of the course session at a later time if necessary. Distance learners can also review each session several times if needed.

Each of the courses that have been aired through the Utah Education Network or disseminated through "Professor Plus" delivery systems has been carefully evaluated using two measures: (1) department course evaluations and (2) media evaluations. These measures employed Likert scales ratings that allow students to quantify their perceptions regarding various instructional aspects of the courses. The thrust of most of these evaluations has been quantitative in nature. However, during the fall of 1990, the program planners completed two qualitative studies of the television delivery systems using focus group methodologies.

The basic intent of the qualitative studies was to answer the question, "What makes a difference in televised instruction?" Each focus group began with this introduction:

> You have been involved in a variety of certification and master's course that have been delivered through television. The purpose of this focus group is to have you share your feelings and opinions about what makes effective televised instruction. What are the elements of televised

instruction that make it effective, interesting, and engaging. Or, to look at the converse, what things detract from the effectiveness of this type of educational delivery system?

Method

Data Collection

Participant selection. Qualitative inquiry often utilizes a small sample of participants purposefully selected (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Patton, 1990). Informed participants who have experienced several different kinds of televised instructional formats were identified for this study. Twenty individuals representing three rural regions in the state were invited to participate. Participants were paid fifty dollars for their involvement in the study and reimbursed for their travel costs. Two focus groups were selected from the eleven individuals who responded to the invitation to participate. Each focus group lasted about one and one half hours.

Participants received a subsequent letter which included the following two questions designed to simulate their thinking prior to the actual focus interview: 1) What really makes a difference in the effectiveness of televised instruction? and 2) What contributes to your learning and motivation in a telecourse? They also received copies of the course and media evaluation forms that had been used to evaluate telecourses during the past several years.

Focus group interviews. Data were gathered for this study using focus group interviewing strategies. The technique of focus group interviews evolved out of group therapy interviews by mental health workers which were conducted for people sharing

common problems. During the 1950s, these methods were modified and used to gather consumer opinions and preferences. Focus group interviews are used extensively in marketing research and program evaluation (Patton, 1987).

A focus group interview is an organized group discussion which centers or focuses on a single theme. Like an individual interview, this method is well suited for obtaining detailed information about how people feel about or respond to a program or product. It may provide insight into how and why a program is appealing, or why difficulties were encountered.

A focus group typically consists of a relatively homogeneous group of participants, usually numbering six to eight. As in an individual interview, participants are asked to respond to questions posed by an interviewer. However, in a focus group interview, participants hear the responses of others, may discuss their responses with each other, and may make additional comments beyond their original responses based on that interaction.

Two focus group interviews were conducted for this study. Each of the group interviews was completed by the same individual, a well trained, experienced, third party focus group specialist. The first group consisted of five participants from the northeast region of the state and the second group was made up of six individuals from the central and southeast regions. A video and audio tape record of each focus group proceeding was made. These recordings were then transcribed for use during the analysis portion of the study.

Data Analysis

Multiple strategies were used by the investigators in the analysis of the data collected for this study. Initially, four investigators (the department distance education director, two telecourse faculty members, and the focus group specialist) read through the two separate focus group transcripts independently. Two of the investigators coded the information based on categories of responses that evolved. The other two investigators examined the data for general themes and patterns. The four met to compare analysis strategies and discuss initial impressions of the data.

Following this meeting, each of the four investigators went back to the transcripts and using the codes and themes that were identified, recoded the material. Following the second reading of the data, the investigators focused on the basic themes that emerged from the data and identified support (participant responses) for these within the documentation. An outline reflecting the findings was developed by the four investigators. This outline with the supporting data has been used as the basis for the following discussion.

Results/Discussion

Focus group responses have been organized into three sections. These sections naturally emerged from the individual and collective analysis of the transcripts. The first section deals with the behaviors and instructional activities specific to instructors which contribute to effective television instruction. The second section describes respondents' perceptions relative to the instructor to student and student to student interaction in the telecourses. The third section relates directly to group dynamics and

their role in effective learning through television. The last category addresses the findings relative to the facilitator/instructor role in effective televised instruction.

Instructor

The comments generated by the focus group participants about effective instructors center around several major themes: (1) preparation and organization activities, (2) presentation and teaching skills, (3) and instructor interaction skills.

Preparation and organization activities. Respondents valued syllabi that were well constructed and carefully conceived. Well designed syllabi provided distance learners with clear expectations about course requirements and objectives. Additionally, they gave students a sense for the amount of time that will be required to respond to the calendared events, assignments and exams. Carefully crafted syllabi indicated instructors had engaged in advanced planning in preparing for television teaching. This planning was valued by distance learners.

Respondents also mentioned the importance of study guides, presentation outlines, handouts, and other support materials. These were instructional aids that distance learners used in following and responding to course lectures, presentations, media and other instructional activities.

Presentation and teaching skills. A number of important skills were identified by respondents. One of the most valued behaviors in instructors was their capacity to relate directly to distance learners through the eye of the television camera(s). This

behavior gave students the sensation that they were actually being addressed as participants in an ongoing class. If instructors neglected this important behavior, distance learners had the feeling that they were just watching a class take place rather than being active participants.

Many respondents commented on the use of the chalkboard in television instruction. As a rule, the use of the chalkboard was viewed as ineffective. Often information printed on the chalkboard could not be seen. Writing was often too small, too light in appearance, or illegible. Other problems were related to the amount of time the camera operator chose to stay focused on the chalkboard information. Frequently, camera operators did not allow sufficient time for learners to complete their note taking. Most students preferred materials that were prepared in advance and distributed in the form of a student manual or handouts.

Pacing was also identified as a critical variable. Although it is difficult to identify the exact speed with which instructors should move through their instructional activities; the pacing should not be too slow or too fast. Because of the passive nature of much of the distance learners' television viewing, instructors must go out of their way to involve distance learners with activities that are engaging and presented at a pace that will keep students involved.

Another behavior that received a good deal of attention was the degree to which instructors conveyed the sense that they were "comfortable" with the television format and delivery system. If they were inordinately nervous or "uptight," learners sensed this immediately. Related to this behavior was the degree to which the instructors

manifested a sense of humor. Respondents appreciated instructors who made good use of humor in illustrating critical points, relating stories or handling ongoing events in television classroom settings.

Respondents made a number of comments about the importance of having instructors repeat every student question or comment. The reason for this request is simple. Many times sound systems in television studio classrooms do not immediately amplify the first few words that are spoken by a student. Or, the student who is making the comment may neglect to activate his/her microphone. The in-studio instructor may be able to hear the comment or question; however, those in the distance sites or those who view the tape later may not be able to hear the question or comment because of the factors just mentioned. With this in mind, instructors are encouraged to repeat all questions or comments to insure that all learners will be able to benefit from the interactions that are taking place or have taken place.

Interaction

Interaction was perceived and valued in different ways by respondents. Interaction may take many forms (instructor to learner, learner to instructor, and learner to learner). The most important interactions took place in the context of student learning teams (learner to learner) or learning groups. This will be further described in the next major section.

Another critical form of interaction concerned feedback. Respondents felt that feedback regarding assignments, exams, and other projects was critical to their effective learning. In some instances, just the knowledge that one could interact with the

instructor or facilitator gave distance learners a sense of security that they could obtain help if they needed it.

Group Dynamics

One of the most interesting outcomes of our focus studies was the discovery of the significant role that learning groups play in television mediated learning. The effects of these learning groups were many and varied. They provided support for the learning activities that are a part of each course and gave distance learners a sense of confidence in their ability to be successful as certification and graduate students. Another related outcome is the type of learning that occurs. Respondents indicated that their television learning accompanied by learning groups was more robust and expansive than learning completed individually. Also, these groups contributed to the motivation of learners to complete courses and continue with their certification or master's programs. Without the group support, some learners said they would have dropped out.

Learning groups provided a solid source of support for discussions. Additionally, these groups furnished the vehicle through which distance learners were able to obtain answers to trivial and important questions. In fact, the learning groups contributed to the feeling that this was a "real" class.

The size, composition, and nature of the learning groups seemed to be optimal. The groups were neither too large or too small (five to six distance learners). The size and informal nature of the groups fostered active question asking and comment making. Also, the groups tended to manage themselves. They often determined the direction,

scope, and nature of the learning activities. Finally, many groups perceived the on-campus instructor as a part of the group even though he/she was not physically present.

Facilitators

Respondents suggested several different kinds of tasks and responsibilities that should be demonstrated by effective facilitators. Facilitators must understand and be able to communicate the instructor's expectations for each course. They should be familiar with the course content in order to assist students with assignments. Prior to the course beginning at the distance site, facilitators need to have contacted the campus professor for specific instructions. As the course progresses the facilitator must maintain ongoing (at least weekly) communication with the campus instructor.

Also, facilitators should ensure that needed course materials are available prior to each session. It helps if the tapes and other instructional media are previewed. Familiarity with the video equipment is also critical for successful facilitation of the distance course.

Individuals function in many different capacities in their facilitator role. They need to be actively involved during each class session. They may assist with discussions, provide clarification for students, interpret information from the campus professor, assist with assignments and help students prepare for examinations, maintain order in the class, and generally support and advocate for the distance students. They serve as a critical link to the campus program, and were viewed by the respondents as critical to the success of the program. Given the multiple tasks and expectations, several respondents mentioned the importance of training for the rural course facilitators.

Summary

Effective television teaching is a function of several important ingredients. Distance learners very much value instructors who are well prepared and organized. Preparation and organization are evidenced in the first few minutes of each telecourse as well as throughout each telecourses in carefully designed syllabi, skillfully selected media and interactive presentation guides.

Instructor presentation skills are also essential. Distance learners appreciate instructors who relate to them by directly looking through the television camera lens, appropriately pace their lecture and learning activities, use humor in teaching concepts and responding to periodic instructional problems, appear to be comfortable with the content and the television teaching environment, repeat key questions and comments from distance learners, and make modest use of the blackboard in presenting information. Learners also value timely delivered feedback regarding course assignments, exams and projects.

Distance learners benefit significantly from their involvement with small learning groups. These groups contribute in a variety of ways to the learning of students. One of the most important contributions is the level of support that learners derive from the groups. This support is provided in a number of different ways. These include encouragement to "stay with" or finish various courses, the provision of feedback regarding course related assignments and projects, the answering of trivial and important questions, and the feeling that if one needed help it was readily available within the group.

There is a lot of interest in the relative importance of interaction in television teaching. Distance learners indicate that many of their needs for interaction can and are met within the context of their learning groups or through their on-site facilitators. One of the most important kinds of interaction is the feedback that is delivered to learners about their performance. Again the need for immediate or timely feedback is often handled through on-site course facilitators.

It is clear that distance learners benefit significantly from active involvement with their on-site, master's level facilitators. Skilled facilitators know the course content well, regularly communicate with the on-campus instructors, consistently preview taped programs when appropriate, and clearly understand the expectations of the on-campus course instructors.

Clearly the perceptions of distance learners relative to instruction delivered through television are important. Individuals who are involved in developing and producing instructional programs for teachers and other professions need to be aware of the critical variables that contribute to successful learning through television.

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Table 1

Demographics of Focus Groups Participants

Demographic Features	
Number of Remote Sites Represented by the Focus Group Respondents	6
Average Age of Respondents (range 31 to 47 years of age)	42
Average Number of Live, Interactive Television Courses Completed by Respondents	3.83
Average Number of Professor Plus Television Courses Completed by Respondents	9.83
Average Age of Respondents	42 years